

Give the Boy a Hand by el_spirito

Series: [The King of Hawkins High \[2\]](#)

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

Steve gets out of the hospital but his parents are still out of town and he's faced with a cold, empty house. Good thing he's got a grumpy sheriff, a pack of smartass kids, and even someone he doesn't expect to help look out for him. Featuring lonely-and-miserable Steve, (more) snarky children, and (still) paternal Hopper, among other things.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This is a sequel to The King of Hawkins High. It might help if you've read that, but basically Steve had to go to the hospital after Billy's beat-down, and it was Hopper who was mainly responsible for getting him there and looking after him. This takes place pretty much straight after the end of that fic -- thanks to the readers who pointed out Steve was alone at the end and basically inspired this whole thing!

Many thanks go to my amazing betas, 221Browncoat and usa123 for helping me clarify ideas and for cheering me on -- you guys are the best!

Title comes from "Let's Hear it for the Boy" from Footloose, which came out in 1984.

Steve sits in the passenger seat of Hopper's truck, leans back against the headrest, and closes his eyes. Everything hurts. His ribs are tightly wrapped and his whole face throbs; he'd busted the two middle fingers of his right hand and they're both taped, rendering his hand basically useless for the next little while. His head is still pounding, but the nausea has mostly passed. Small favors, he supposes.

The driver's side opens and Hopper slides in. "Here you go, kid," he says, handing Steve a pharmacy bag with the pain meds his doctor prescribed inside.

"Thanks," Steve says, clutching the bag with his left hand. Hopper starts the truck and backs out of the parking lot before turning towards Steve's house. It's a bit awkward, mostly because Steve doesn't know what to say. He's pretty embarrassed about what he said to Hopper in the hospital last night; he would never have said so much if he hadn't been addled by his concussion and the pain meds. He stares out the windows and sighs, then winces as pain shoots

through his ribcage.

“So,” Hopper says after a moment. Steve braces himself. “Spent some time down in the tunnels, huh?”

Steve scoffs. “Uh, yeah,” he says.

“And that was *after* the whole --” he gestures to Steve’s face.

“Yep,” Steve says.

Hopper lets out a low whistle. “How the hell did *that* happen?”

“I was kidnapped, basically. By 13-year-olds. It’s all a bit of a blur after Billy’s -- you know. Woke up in the back of a car with Max at the wheel.”

“That sounds terrifying,” Hopper says, exhaling in a long sigh.

“Worse than the demo-dogs,” Steve says. “Still couldn’t let them go down there alone, though.”

Hopper is quiet for a long moment. “You did a good thing,” he says finally. “Watching out for them like that.”

“Yeah,” Steve says. There’s not much else to say and he’s honestly not sure why Hopper is telling him this again, especially when it’s not like he had much of a choice. Shitheads those kids might be, but somehow they’ve become *his* shitheads.

They pull up to his house and Steve feels exhausted just looking at its dark windows.

“You sure about this?” Hopper says. Steve glances at the older man, taking in the dark half-moons smudged under his eyes. The past few days have been hard on everyone and Hopper probably hasn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in a while.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Steve says. “You should go get some sleep. You look like shit.”

“Hey, language,” Hopper says, pointing a finger his direction. “But

fine. Let me walk you to the door, at least. I don't wanna watch you fumbling with your keys for twenty minutes with that hand of yours."

"Yeah, whatever," Steve says, but in reality he's grateful. He hands his keys over to Hopper without saying anything else and starts the laborious process of getting out of the truck. He tries to open the door with his thumb, which proves to be zero percent effective, then tries to reach over with his left hand but has to stop after only a second of movement as it tugs at his ribs.

"Shiiiit," he hisses, closing his eyes in frustration. The door swings open from the outside and Hopper sighs.

"I don't know about this, Harrington," he says.

"I'll be fine," Steve says, swinging his right leg out of the truck and then slowly following it with his left. "Just got stiff, is all."

Hopper sighs and grabs his right arm as Steve manages to get fully out of the truck, groaning as it jostles, well, everything. He shuffles up to the front door, Hopper hovering over him as he goes, and leans against the door jamb as the sheriff unlocks the door.

"Thanks," Steve says, taking the keys out of the door and turning to face Hopper. "I've got it from here."

Hopper sighs heavily. "Steve, your parents --"

"Stop," Steve says, holding up his good hand. "Just -- just don't. I'm not a *kid* anymore. I'll be okay. Go on," he adds, when Hopper still looks unconvinced. "El needs you. Besides, I've seen enough of your ugly mug for one day." Hopper finally rolls his eyes and *actually* ruffles Steve's hair.

"Fine, you little smartass," he says. "I'll be back to check on you soon, though. Probably later tonight, tomorrow at the latest."

"I'll be *fine*," Steve says, for the hundredth time. "But if you want to bring me some KFC I wouldn't complain."

"Yeah, yeah," Hopper says. He starts walking back to his truck and Steve is about to close the door when the older man turns back

around. “Don’t forget to take your meds first thing!” he says. “It’s always better to stay on top of them than to have to play catch up. And don’t try to be a tough guy, either. You’ve earned those, fair and square.”

“Got it,” Steve says. “Good bye. ”

Hopper honest-to-God flips him the bird and climbs in the truck, and Steve forces himself to close the door and not watch him drive off like a kid seeing his dad off for work.

The house is cold, as he knew it would be, so he puts his meds on the table and trudges over to the thermostat and cranks it up. There isn’t much in the fridge, but there are a few packs of Top Ramen in the cupboard, which he stares at for a few seconds before deciding that he’ll reach for them in a while, after he’s been thoroughly medicated.

Mostly, he just wants to lay down, but the stairs look equal parts exhausting and intimidating. “Damn it,” he mutters, then takes the first step. It hurts, but he’s not surprised. At this point even breathing hurts. “Damn it to *hell* ,” he says, then grits his teeth and makes the long climb to the top, pausing between every step to catch his breath and brace his ribs. He makes it to his bedroom and decides there is no way he’s climbing those again, so he’d better get everything he could possibly need right now.

He bends over carefully and ruffles through the bottom of his closet, pulling out his old duffle bag and slinging it onto his bed, and stuffing his toothbrush, toothpaste, his favorite flannel pajamas, and deodorant inside. He grabs his pillow and sets it on top, then looks at his selection. A few seconds later he works a box out from under his bed entirely using his feet to avoid bending over --he’s irrationally proud of himself for it -- and pulls out a quilt. It’s a patchwork quilt, mostly in blues and denim, and there are little baseballs sewn on all over it. His grandma made it for him for his fifth birthday, and he hasn’t looked at it in years, but today, right now, it’s the coziest blanket in the house. He shoves it into his duffle, and even though it doesn’t close, he manages to carry it downstairs.

He has to rest for a few minutes once he gets downstairs; his chest and head are screaming at him, plus a new wave of the dizziness and

nausea that he'd hoped he'd seen the last of has cropped up.

Shit he's tired.

Steve grabs a cup of water and a banana that doesn't look too overripe, and carries them over to the big La-Z-Boy that's normally reserved for his father. Then he grabs the pain pills and antibiotics -- apparently, going into an "unknown tunnel system" with open wounds isn't the best idea in the world and the doctors think contamination is bad-- as well as a bowl for his nausea, and sets them on the table next to the chair. Next is sticking his pillow and the quilt in the chair and changing into pajamas. He manages to unbutton his pants and mostly shimmy them off, and if he sits down he can work them off his ankles by using his toes.

"This *sucks*," he mutters. He manages to get his pajama pants on but decides not to even bother trying with his shirt. He does a quick mental checklist of everything he's collected, and decides it's good enough to collapse into the armchair and just never move again. If he's missed anything, well, he'll just have to do without. The last thing he does is close the blinds on the sliding doors that lead to the pool from the living room. He hasn't been back there since his ill-fated party, and it isn't the most comforting thing in the world to look outside and see the woods that have literally contained monsters.

He wraps his quilt around his shoulders and eases himself into the chair, curling onto his good side and shivering a bit, then groans when he realizes he hasn't taken his pain meds yet. "Damn it to hell," he grumbles, levering himself upright. He manages to eat a little over half the banana, then downs the pills with a big gulp of water. He's just settled back into the chair when there's a pounding at the door.

"Nngh," Steve groans, and decides that whoever is out there will just have to come back some other time. The pounding doesn't abate, though, so he pushes himself up with a low curse and shuffles to the door. "*What*," he hisses, yanking the door open.

He is greeted by four very short troublemakers, all peering up at him with innocent faces. Steve sighs.

“Hi Steve!” Dustin says, smiling broadly. “You look like shit.”

The other kids -- Lucas, Mike, and Max -- all nod vehemently in agreement. Steve blinks. “Right back at ya,” he says finally. “What are you all *doing* here?”

“We rode our bikes,” Lucas says, gesturing to a pile of bicycles on the lawn.

“We wanted to come see you,” Max says.

“Mostly to make sure you aren’t dead,” Mike adds with a shrug.

“Huh,” Steve says. “Well, as you can see, I’m definitely not dead.”

“Great,” Dustin says, pushing past him into the house. “Then you’ll appreciate all the shit we hauled over here.” The other three squeeze past him and Steve stands in the doorway, eyebrows raised, as they take in his house. Dustin and Lucas set backpacks on the table and start pulling stuff out of them. Lucas has a bag of cookies and what looks like a potted plant -- which sends Steve’s eyebrows even further into his hairline -- and Dustin pulls out a stack of comic books and some movies.

“We also wanted to apologize for getting you beat up,” Max says.

“Wha -- you guys didn’t do that,” Steve says.

“If Billy hadn’t seen us in the window, he would have gone home,” Max says. She drops her head. “If he hadn’t seen *me* .”

“Yeah, that’s not true,” Steve says. “Billy was looking for a fight, and he definitely wouldn’t have believed me anyway. I don’t know if you guys have noticed, but I’m not a very good liar.”

“We’ve noticed,” Mike says.

“See?” Steve says, pointing at Mike. “So, don’t think like that.”

“Well, we brought you stuff anyway,” Mike says. He pulls a plastic bag that looks pretty heavy out of his backpack and sets it on the table next to the other gifts. Steve stares blankly.

“The hell is that,” he says finally.

“We pooled our leftover Halloween candy,” Lucas says. “It was Max’s idea.”

Steve Harrington may be seventeen years old, but he still remembers well the thrill of Halloween and the utter joy that accompanies buckets of chocolate. The magnitude of this offering is not lost on him.

“Wow guys, thank you,” he says, looking at the spread and then at each of the kids in turn. “But you really didn’t have to. How do you think I’m gonna eat all that?”

“Slowly?” Dustin says, grinning.

“Smartass,” Steve says, rolling his eyes. “How about you guys go pick out a movie and we can share it while we watch?” He doesn’t tell them that he’s only supposed to look at a TV for thirty minutes at a time. The kids quickly agree and Max and Mike head over to the living room. Dustin and Lucas hang behind, presumably to explain their offerings.

Dustin holds up the comics. “These are just to borrow,” he says, “but they’re some of my favorites. See, this is X-Men, and this one has Spider-Man, and this one is Batman. You know about them, right?”

“...Vaguely,” Steve says. “I can’t actually read for longer than, like, half an hour right now,” he says, gesturing vaguely towards his head. “Doctor’s orders.”

“That’s okay,” Dustin says, setting the comics down and patting at Steve’s shoulder. “I’ve read them already like, five times, so you can take a long time. I don’t mind.” So saying, he heads over to where Mike and Max already have the TV on, videos in hand.

Lucas looks up at him. “My mom sent this stuff,” he says, gesturing at the cookies and what Steve now sees is an *orchid*. “Sheriff Hopper told my parents what you did and, uh, they wanted me to say thank you.”

Steve feels his face heating up and clears his throat. “It’s no big deal,”

he says. “Really.”

“Yeah, sure,” Lucas says. He scratches awkwardly at the back of his neck and Steve takes pity on him.

“We’d better get over there before they pick something lame,” he says, gesturing to the other kids. Lucas nods and joins his friends, launching into the discussion by loudly proclaiming that they watched *Temple of Doom* last time, and Han Solo is cooler than Indiana Jones anyway.

They finally settle on *The Empire Strikes Back* and all squish onto the couch (even though there’s a huge armchair *and* a loveseat) so that Steve has Dustin practically tucked under his armpit, the bag of candy in Mike’s lap. As Dustin gets comfortable he takes notice of Steve’s taped up hand, apparently for the first time, and immediately points at it.

“Guys! Steve’s Spock!”

“I’m what?” says Steve.

“Your hand,” Mike says. “It looks like the Vulcan greeting.” He separates his fingers so that there’s a gap between the third and fourth in imitation of how Steve’s are taped, with the thumb sticking out. Dustin and Lucas follow suit.

Steve blinks.

“Live long and prosper?” Lucas says. “Star Trek?”

“Damn Harrington, have you ever even heard of TV?” Dustin says.

“Shut up, of course I have,” Steve says. His head is starting to get a tiny bit fuzzy. “Um, I just took some pain meds, guys.”

“So you’re high right now?” Max says, leaning over the boys to peer at his face.

“Gettin’ there,” Steve says. “Also, I’m not s’posed to watch more than a half hour of TV at a time.”

“He’s totally gonna fall asleep guys,” Mike says. “He won’t even make it to Cloud City.”

“Nuh-uh,” Steve says.

“Uh, yeah you are,” Lucas says. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Steve says.

“That’s okay,” Dustin says. “We know you’re not normally this lame.”

“Hey,” Steve says, frowning, but his head is too fuzzy for him to do more than wave an arm around a little in protest.

“It’s okay,” Dustin says again, grabbing at his arm. “Just relax. We’re okay.”

Someone gets the quilt -- his grandma’s quilt -- and tucks it around him and someone else --probably Dustin-- pats his head as he drifts to sleep.

He wakes up when the movie ends and the kids are gathering their stuff up. “Hey buddy,” Dustin says. “We’re just getting ready to go. Mike and Lucas are cleaning up the stuff from the popcorn and then we’ll go.”

“Popcorn?” Steve says.

“Yeah, we made some. We thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t.”

“Good,” Dustin says. “I’ll go help them.”

Steve nods blearily, surprised when Max sits next to him.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey,” he says back.

“I never thanked you for, you know. What you did.”

“S’ nothing,” Steve says. He wonders if they will ever stop thanking

him, and what he should do if they don't.

"You were never going to beat Billy."

"Wha?" Steve mumbles, focusing on Max again.

"You were never going to beat him. You're not like him. He -- he wanted to hurt you, and you just wanted to stop him."

"Oh," Steve says. He isn't sure what else to say, really.

Max looks about as uncomfortable as he feels. "I guess I just don't want you to feel bad," she says. "It's okay to not want to hurt people."

"Yeah," Steve says. "Thanks."

"Okay, we're ready to go," Dustin says, coming back. He looks skeptically at Steve and purses his lips. "Are you sure you're okay by yourself?"

"Dude," Steve says.

"Just thought I'd ask," Dustin says, holding his hands up.

"Well don't. Besides, who's the grown-up here?"

"You're seventeen," Mike says, sitting on the dining room table and swinging his legs.

"*Closer* to grown-up, then."

"Mm-hmm," Dustin says, his face covered in skepticism.

"I'm okay, guys, just need to sleep it off. That's easier to do when you little shitheads aren't around anyway."

Dustin still doesn't look convinced. Come to think of it, none of them do.

Steve sighs. "Look, I'll call you if anything comes up, okay?"

"Promise?" says Lucas.

Steve shakes his head. He's promising a bunch of *thirteen-year-olds* that he'll call them if he runs into any trouble. How has his life even come to this?

"Yes," he huffs. "I promise."

The kids finally seem satisfied and finish packing up their things. Dustin taps the stack of comics on the table with a meaningful look. "You *have* to read these," he says. "It's okay if it takes you a while cause of all--" he gestures at his face and winces -- " *that* ."

"Okay okay, whatever," Steve says. "I'll read them. Now get outta here."

Dustin grins at him and Steve walks them to the door, watches as they all clamber onto their bikes and ride off, yelling at each other and immediately launching into a race. Steve watches them go, sticks his tongue out when Lucas turns around and pulls a face at him, and finally closes the door.

If the house seemed quiet before, well, now it seems much more so. Still, Steve's been alone plenty of times and this is no different. Plus, he feels better than he had, at least physically, and he slept through enough of the movie that his head doesn't hurt. He grabs Dustin's comics and gets settled in the chair, then turns the TV on low as background noise.

He reads off and on, kind of perplexed by the Uncanny X-Men if he's being honest, and dozes off every page or two. It's more than a little pathetic, but with his head and face and chest throbbing, he can't quite bring himself to care. By the time it's dark outside he's exhausted and overdue for his pain meds.

He hauls himself out of the chair and shuffles into the kitchen, remembering with a sigh that the Top Ramen is going to require reaching up to the highest shelf. It only takes him half a second to decide that he doesn't want to mess with that and starts digging through the other cupboards.

"Oh," he says as his hand wraps around a familiar round shape. "Oh, yes ." He pulls out a Cup O' Noodles -- chicken flavored -- and heads

over to the sink. He's a terrible cook -- worse cook than boyfriend even -- but he can handle this.

Of course, after Steve makes the Cup O' Noodles, he has to eat it, and honestly, his stomach churns as soon as he gets a whiff of that salty, artificial broth. "Oh shit," he manages, and then he's puking into the sink. His ribs are screaming at him and his head isn't too excited either, and by the time he's finished, he's sobbing.

It's all he can do to get himself back to the living room, hunched over and dizzy and vision blurred with tears. He collapses into the chair and curls up with the quilt, clutches his stupid vomit-bowl and tries to fall asleep, but his mind goes back to that morning unbidden. Hopper got ahold of his parents, no problem, but as soon as they'd heard Steve's injuries weren't life-threatening, they'd decided that they would be staying in Baltimore for the rest of their trip.

Steve knows it shouldn't bother him; he's seventeen years old and certainly not a kid anymore, and it's only for a couple of days. He's been alone for longer. But damn it, he wishes there was someone to help him with his pain meds and to get him water when he runs out, and maybe even to just tell him everything will be okay. He throws up again and cries some more and prays that sleep will come quickly.

At some point, finally, it does.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks so much for reading, leaving kudos, and especially reviewing. You guys are great! The story's already complete, so I'll be posting the rest over the next couple days.

Hopper swings by the Sinclair house to check up on Lucas before he goes home. Apparently Lucas had only told his parents the bare bones version of what happened -- which, considering, is probably a good thing -- so they're more than a little alarmed when he shows up. He reassures them that Lucas is fine and Steve is getting there, makes sure for himself that Lucas is, in fact, fine, and finally *finally* heads back to the Byers' place.

El is quiet on the ride back to the cabin, probably too tired to manage much of a conversation. Her hair has come a little bit out of its gelled-down glory, and her makeup has smudged even more, leaving dark circles under her eyes. She looks exhausted. Hopper can only imagine what she's been through, emotionally, over the past few days, and *physically* he has no idea what kind of toll closing an interdimensional gate takes on a twelve or thirteen year old body. Whatever it might be, he figures all discussion of whatever turned El into *Jane* -- bitchin' Jane in all of her punk-rock glory -- will have to wait a few days. For now, he can't stop seeing her as El, the curly-haired moppet who's taken up residence in his heart, and the *Jane* thing -- well, he's going to have to work on that.

In the meantime, he can get a good night's sleep for once and relax -- *really* relax -- for the first time since Will Byers went missing. He pulls up to the cabin and looks over at El; she's sleeping, soundly, head resting against the window and mouth hanging open. Hopper climbs out of the cab and goes around to the other side, easing the door open and easily picking El up. She jerks awake and stares at him, brows furrowed.

"Hey," Hopper says. "You're okay. Shh, you're alright." El sighs and wraps her arms around his neck, letting her head rest at the junction

of his neck and shoulder. He swallows around the lump in his throat that so often comes when El is involved and carries her into the cabin, depositing her gently on her bed. He eases her shoes off, unable to suppress a rueful grin at the thick boots, and then her coat, and then he tugs the blankets up around her chin. He watches her sleep, just for a moment, allows himself to soak up her presence and her *safety* before heading into the living room.

His plan is to watch some TV, maybe take a swig or two of whiskey -- because he's earned it, damn it-- and then get a good night's rest. It's a good plan. Great, even. But as he turns on the TV, whiskey in hand and feet stretched out in front of him, he can't get the damn Harrington kid out of his head. He'd taken the news of his parents' decision to stay in Maryland like a champ, but Hopper wasn't born yesterday and he can tell when someone is trying not to look like the bottom of his world just dropped out. He knows what it looks like when a person's worst fears are confirmed.

And now he's all alone in that damn house, probably feeling like shit.

Hopper flips through the channels one more time, vainly hoping he'll find something to take his mind off of the seventeen year old he somehow pseudo-adopted, but eventually gives up and turns the TV off with a grunt. He looks balefully at the glass of whiskey before setting it down with a sigh and standing, stretching his back out before heading to El's room. He's loathe to wake her, but even more so to leave without telling her.

He taps at her door, unsurprised when there isn't a response, and then gently pushes it open. He kneels down next to the bed and gently grabs El's shoulder. It's a testament to how exhausted she is that she doesn't jerk awake, but just blinks up at him, frowning.

"Hey there," Hopper says. "I've gotta go to the Harrington place real quick, just to check up on Steve."

El props herself up on one elbow, frown deepening. "Steve is hurt?" she says. Hopper runs a hand over his face.

"Hopefully not worse than the other night, but he's gotta be feeling it today," he says. "And he's all alone."

If there's anyone who knows about being alone it's El. She nods solemnly and puts her hand on his. "Go," she says.

"I'll be back soon," Hopper says. "Should only take me a few minutes."

"Be safe," El says. She already looks well on her way back to sleep so Hopper kisses the crown of her head and tucks her back in, then heads out.

The Harrington house is, as he expected, completely dark when he pulls up. He turns off the engine and sits for a minute, once again wondering how the hell this became his life, then walks up to the door. He knocks firmly and waits, one finger tapping impatiently at his leg.

There's no response.

Undeterred, he knocks again, harder, concern starting to grow when there is again no answer.

"Harrington? Hey, Steve?" he calls. "If you don't answer I'm gonna kick your door down, kid. You there?" When he is greeted only by silence yet again, he tries the knob and is surprised when it opens. "Steve? I'm coming in, bud."

The TV is on, its volume low, and its sickly blue light casts deep shadows on a nearby armchair. Hopper has to do a double take before he realizes the chair contains Steve Harrington.

As he draws near, the TV's light reveals that the kid looks like shit, highlighting the circles beneath his eyes and how pale he is under all his droopy hair. He's curled up tightly, a bowl clutched to his chest, and Hopper swears low under his breath when he realizes there is vomit in it.

"Aw, buddy," he murmurs, easing the bowl from Steve's fingers. Steve groans and shifts, then blinks owlishly up at him, squinting in confusion.

"Hey," Hopper says. "How you feeling?"

Steve blinks again. “Think I puked up everything I ever ate.”

Hopper winces, and Steve does too. He shifts again, groans, and looks up at him with a resigned expression.

“Damn it. I’ve gotta take a piss.” Hopper can handle watching the kid try to prop himself up for all of three seconds before he’s rushing in to help him, setting the puke-bowl on the floor and trying to tuck an arm under Steve’s. Steve lets out a strained yelp and Hopper swears loudly; it’s all they can do, working together, to get Steve standing upright, and even then he’s slumped against Hopper’s side.

“You okay?” Hopper says after a moment. Steve nods.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m okay. Just a little stiff is all.” He manages to straighten up a little and slips out of Hopper’s grasp. “I can go on my own.”

Hopper watches him shuffle to the bathroom, his gait painfully slow and with his good arm curled up around his ribs, finally reaching it and closing the door firmly behind him. Hopper takes the opportunity to go to the kitchen and clean out the vomit bowl, and to do a little snooping at the same time. He is the police chief, after all.

The cupboards are mostly bare, the fridge even more so, and Hopper can’t help wondering just how long Steve’s been here on his own. The living room paints a no-less pathetic picture; flipping the lights on, Hopper can see a duffel bag stuffed with what he assumes must be some key items from Steve’s bedroom, and a worn quilt with Steve’s name stitched carefully into one corner draped over the armchair the kid’s been occupying.

Hopper shakes his head with a huff, cursing under his breath. He might have come here with the intention of just checking on Steve, but he’s sure as hell not going to leave him here.

The bathroom door creaks open and Steve comes out, still hunched over and more pale than before. He glances at Hopper before heading determinedly for the chair.

“How’re the ribs?”

“Fucking *sore* ,” Steve hisses. Hopper raises an eyebrow. “I think I might have puked up my pain pills.”

Hopper hums in agreement. “Been there,” he says. “It sucks *ass* .”

Steve snorts, then winces. “Yeah,” he says. He pauses on his journey to the chair, braced up against the couch, and frowns at him. “What are you doing here again?”

“Just came to check on you,” Hopper says. “But you don’t look like you’re doing so hot.”

“M fine,” Steve says, glaring at him. It’s not very intimidating though, what with one eye still being mostly swollen shut, and the myriad of bruises and stitching criss-crossing his face.

“Mm-hmm,” Hopper says. “Sure you are.”

Steve looks down, fiddles with the blanket draped over the back of the couch. “Not much I could do about it anyway,” he says.

“Maybe not,” Hopper says. Steve’s shoulders slump. “I can do something about it though. You’re coming home with me, kid.”

Steve’s head snaps up and he frowns. “What?”

“You think I’m gonna leave you here to wallow?” Hopper says. “I saw your cupboard. You can’t survive off Top Ramen and popcorn while you’re trying to get better.”

“Can too,” Steve mumbles, but he looks relieved.

“Right. Do you need to grab anything? I noticed your duffel earlier.” Steve blushes, right up to his ears, and shrugs. Hopper sighs as understanding dawns. “Underwear.”

“Yeah,” Steve says. “No way you’re going through my drawer.”

“No way I’m waiting for you to hobble your way up those stairs,” Hopper counters. “It may come as a shock, but I’ve actually seen briefs before. Which room is yours?”

Steve hesitates for a moment before easing himself to the couch and, apparently, resigning himself to his fate. "First door on the left," he says. "Underwear is in the top right drawer of my dresser."

"Got it. I'll be right back," Hopper says, heading for the stairs. "You'd better be right there when I get back."

"Chief, I don't have anywhere else to go, and even if I did, I doubt I could get there."

Hopper heads up the stairs, shaking his head at Steve's resigned tone, and quickly finds the kid's room. It's about what he would expect of any teenage boy, posters and trophies and clothes thrown everywhere. A quick rifle through the dresser in the corner reveals a stack of clean underwear, and he grabs the whole thing as well as a few shirts just in case. He clomps back down the stairs and throws everything into Steve's duffel, then swings it over his shoulder.

"Anything else?" he asks. Steve blinks at him, half-asleep again in just the few minutes Hopper was gone.

"No?" he says.

"Good. Can you stand?" Steve nods blearily and hoists himself up with a grimace, good hand wrapped around his side. Hopper grabs the quilt with Steve's name on it from the chair and wraps it around the kid's shoulders, making sure Steve has a good grip on it before slowly prodding him toward the door. "Keys?"

Steve points toward the table with his casted hand, still clutching the blanket to himself with the other. He looks all of five years old, honestly. Hopper scoops the keys off the table and continues their slow journey, a hand resting lightly on Steve's back partly to steer the kid's increasingly wobbly steps, and partly in case he needs to take quick action to prevent a nosedive. They pause at the front door, where Hopper makes sure Steve is able to stay upright before locking the door, and then they slowly (finally) make their way to his truck.

"Can you get in or do you need a boost?" Hopper asks. Steve gives him what he probably thinks is a good glare, but turns out just looking more

“I can do it,” he says, and proceeds to sort of pull himself up and more or less flop into the seat.

“Nice,” Hopper says. Steve huffs and tugs the door shut, then clutches the blanket tight and leans his head back against the seat. “You settled? Buckled up?” Steve grunts and tries to free an arm from the confines of the blanket, so Hopper reaches over and tugs the seat belt over Steve’s cocooned form.

“Thanks,” Steve mumbles. He looks close to dozing off, so Hopper drives in silence until they pull up to the cabin. Steve lifts his head as the engine shuts off, hair even more tousled than usual, and blinks. He raises an eyebrow at the expanse of woods before him.

“It’s back there,” Hopper says. He gets out and heads around to Steve’s side, and has the door open before Steve is able to get out of his blanket. He holds a hand out.

“I can walk,” Steve huffs, glaring at him.

“Trip wires,” Hopper says.

Steve gapes at him. “ *What* ,” he says.

Hopper shrugs.

“You’re like Indiana Jones,” Steve mutters, allowing himself to be guided out of the truck. Hopper tucks an arm under Steve’s shoulders and steers him carefully around the various booby traps he and El set, finally making it to the cabin in one piece. Hopper opens the door and lets Steve shuffle in ahead of him, then realizes a little too late that they hadn’t quite cleaned up since he and El had their fight.

“Huh,” Steve says, glancing at the boarded up windows. There are slivers of glass glinting on the floor. Hopper clears his throat, trying to come up with an excuse, but Steve shrugs and then looks him in the eye and says, “Windstorm the other night hit you guys pretty hard up here, huh?”

Hopper doesn’t smile, but it’s a near thing. “Yeah,” he says. “Sure did.” He sets Steve’s duffel on the couch and heads to the kitchen. “Anything sound good?”

Steve grimaces. “No?” he says.

“You’ve gotta eat something or the meds’ll screw up your stomach,” Hopper says. “So, something light? Toast? Eggos?”

“Toast sounds tolerable,” Steve answers.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable on the couch? You’re welcome to watch some TV but you’re gonna have to keep it down. El’s sleeping in her room.”

“Thanks,” Steve says, sinking into the couch. “I’m actually pretty tired, and the TV makes my head hurt, so I’m just gonna lay down.”

“Don’t go to sleep,” Hopper says. “Food first.”

Steve sighs but mutters an affirmative, so Hopper sticks two slices of bread into the toaster and gets a glass of water. The toast pops up and he butters it, then takes it and the water over to the couch. “Here you go, kid,” he says, holding out the toast and setting the glass down on the table. Steve sits up and nibbles at the toast with a grimace, but he manages a whole piece of it before palming his meds and downing them with the water.

“Happy?” he mutters, putting the second piece of toast down and poking at it with a disgusted look.

“Yep,” Hopper says. “You can sleep now, if you want.”

“Oh, I want,” Steve says, sliding down until he’s sideways. Hopper eyes the broken windows for a moment, then heads to his loft and digs out a blanket and extra pillow that seems reasonably fluffy. By the time he gets back to the couch, Steve’s eyes are already closed, his quilt thrown half over him. Hopper tucks the quilt and his blanket around him, then bends over Steve’s head.

“Lift your head for a sec,” he says, and Steve complies without opening his eyes. Hopper slides the pillow under his head and gives the poofy hair a pat. “I’m heading to bed. You sleep well.” Steve mumbles something unrecognizable and nuzzles down into the pillow. Hopper takes that as his cue to leave and stumbles back to his bedroom, the exhaustion of the last couple days seeping suddenly

into his bones. He yawns and unlaces his boots and kicks them off, then climbs into bed without even bothering to take his uniform off.

He's asleep in moments.

3. Chapter 3

By the time Hopper comes around the next morning, El has already woken and has taken up a seat on the coffee table --feet tucked up under her, chin resting on clasped hands-- and is staring intently at Steve Harrington as he sleeps. Hopper frowns.

“Whatcha doin’ there, El?” he asks. El doesn’t look up. Hopper shrugs and heads into the kitchen to put a pot of coffee on, raising his eyebrows in vague surprise when he realizes it’s 12:00 already. He figures El hasn’t had a whole lot of experience with teenage boys or their hair, so her curiosity might not be so strange, after all. She pads into the kitchen only a few minutes later and watches as Hopper pours himself a mug of coffee.

“Steve’s hurt,” she says.

“Yep,” Hopper says, taking a sip of the coffee.

“Why?” El asks, settling into her chair at the table. Hopper pops a couple Eggos in the toaster.

“Some people,” Hopper starts, and then pauses for a second, his back to El as he waits for the Eggos. He takes a deep breath and thinks about the best way to answer her, decides there isn’t really any good way, and is startled when the waffles pop out of the toaster. He pulls out a plate and slides them onto it, gets the syrup and a fork, and trundles it all to the table.

“Milk?” he says. El nods. He grabs it for her along with a cup and then slides into the seat across from her. She pours syrup on her waffle and sticks a massive forkful in her mouth, then looks up at him.

“Why?” she says again.

“Some people have a lot of anger inside them,” Hopper says. “It’s not a bad thing, necessarily, but sometimes people don’t know how to deal with it, and then they take that anger out on other people.”

El stares at him. Hopper suppresses a wince.

“Does that make any sense?”

“Hmm,” El hums. It’s a non-committal sound, definitely not leaning one way or the other, but she seems to be mulling it over which is good enough for Hopper. “Billy was very angry,” she says finally.

“Yeah,” Hopper says. “I think he is.” He’s been pondering this one a lot, actually. The Harringtons made it clear in their brief conversation that they would be bringing charges against Billy, and the Sinclairs probably won’t be far behind. Frankly, the kid deserves it. Terrorizing a little kid and beating the shit out of a peer -- far beyond the typical teenage fighting -- more than qualifies him for assault charges. Hell, they could practically get him on attempted murder. But there’s something about a kid that age with that level of aggression that sits uneasy in his stomach. Could be he’s just a bad egg, but Hopper has a hard time believing that.

Hopper’s ruminations are interrupted by a groan and a thud from the front room, presumably Steve waking up and flailing off the couch. El looks at him with the wide-eyed, slightly incredulous look she employs so often.

“I know, I’m going,” Hopper says. His hypothesis is quickly proved right as he takes in the sight of Steve Harrington trying to untangle himself from a wad of blankets on the floor. “Need a hand?”

“No,” Steve says, and struggles for a second before sighing heavily. “Yes.” Hopper bends over and helps him get free, then helps pull him to his feet. Steve groans and winces, curls an arm around his ribs and lets out a sigh. “Feeling like shit is the worst,” he says.

“Well, get some food in you and then you can take your meds,” Hopper says. He feels a little guilty for neglecting to wake Steve up earlier to take his pain pills, but he isn’t sure he would have been able to wake even if he’d wanted to.

“Always with the meds,” Steve grumbles, but it’s a half-hearted complaint and he doesn’t look particularly put out.

“You ready for Eggos?” Hopper asks, pulling a couple out of the toaster and sliding them in front of Steve. El holds up the syrup and Steve grimaces.

“Maybe no syrup today,” he says, holding his stomach. “Thanks though.” El takes the syrup back and adds a little more to her remaining fourth of a waffle, and Steve nibbles on his for a moment before frowning and looking up. “What day is it?” he asks

Hopper swears passionately under his breath. “It’s Monday. Flo’s gonna send Powell after me any time.”

“Oh. I should probably call the school,” Steve says, his expression showing zero desire to actually do that.

“I can do that, make sure you get excused,” Hopper says, scrubbing at his hair. “I’m gonna call in to the station too, just to make sure things are okay, let Flo know I’m not dead.” She probably isn’t as concerned as he thinks she is; hell, she’ll probably laugh and say it was good for him to take a few days off, since he has about a thousand vacation days saved up anyway.

“Thanks,” Steve says, taking another tentative bite of the Eggo. He sets it down after eating maybe half of it, looking a bit queasy. Hopper narrows his eyes a bit and makes a mental note to check on the kid later.

“Do you want to watch TV?” El asks quietly. Steve looks at her and shrugs.

“I might fall asleep part way through, hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t,” El says.

“Alright,” Steve says. “Let’s do it, then.” He levers himself up from the table and shuffles into the living room, El trailing right behind him. Hopper watches with some measure of fondness as they get settled on the couch, Steve stretching his long legs onto the table and El curling up close to him, clutching a blanket around herself.

“I’m gonna make those calls and then hop in the shower. Are you two gonna be okay?”

He hears a little “yes” from El and is treated to a massive eye roll from Steve as he glances backwards over the top of the couch.

“I’m *seventeen* ,” he says, not for the first time. Hopper suspects it won’t be the last.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Enjoy your *Guiding Light* .”

xxxx

Two phone calls and one shower later, Hopper collapses onto the couch next to El and Steve. El is watching the TV with bleary eyes, and Steve is conked out next to her, neck back and mouth open, snoring just a little.

“Hey,” he says, ruffling El’s hair. “You okay?”

“Yes,” she says, glancing sideways at him. She makes a small movement towards him and he lifts an arm, allowing her to scoot into his side. He wraps his arm around her and squeezes, allowing the relief of having her back here, safe, to wash over him for the first time since getting back from the Gate.

“You wanna talk?” he asks. She shakes her head against his chest. “Alright. You just say the word and we can talk it out, whenever you want to,” he says. She stays quiet and he picks up the remote, flipping through the channels until settling on a game show. Steve lets out a little snort and lifts his head blearily before settling back into a sound sleep. Hopper smiles fondly and uncurls his arm to adjust Steve’s blanket.

“I saw my mother,” El whispers into his shirt. Hopper pauses for a moment, takes a deep breath, pulls El’s head close and kisses her hair.

“Aw, sweetheart,” he says. “I’m so sorry.”

El sniffles and when she speaks, her voice is small, and brittle. “He hurt her,” she says. “He *broke* her.”

“I know,” he whispers. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” She curls into his side, feeling small and fragile and utterly young, so far from the

strong young woman he had watched close the Gate in awe and pride and a tiny bit of fear. “It’s okay,” he says. “It’s okay. You’re gonna be okay.”

xxxx

Hopper is jolted awake by a sound he can’t place, heart thudding in his ears in alarm. El is still curled in his arms, and the TV is quietly blaring, playing some infomercial. It’s pitch black outside. Hopper scrubs at his eyes and blinks, trying to figure out what woke him up. He glances over to the side of the couch, which is now empty, and then spots a strip of light blaring from beneath the bathroom door. A moment later he hears a harsh barking sound and winces. He untangles himself from beneath El, makes sure she’s comfortable on the couch and adjusts her blanket, then heads to the bathroom.

“Steve?” he says outside the door, then waits for 0.5 seconds before pushing it open. Steve looks up blearily from his position bent over the toilet. “What’s goin’ on?”

Steve doesn’t get a chance to say anything before he gets caught up in a coughing fit that gets bad enough it starts him retching. Hopper stands there for a second, uncertain, before sitting on the edge of the tub behind Steve and resting a hand on the teen’s shuddering back. After a few long moments Steve straightens up and collapses against the wall at his back, so that Hopper’s feet are next to his knees.

“Damn. I thought we were over this part,” Hopper says. Steve just keeps leaning against the wall, face squinched up and a hand around his ribs, breathing in measured sips of air. “How long did that last?”

“Dunno,” Steve says, takes a breath, “too long.”

Hopper frowns. Steve is pale as hell and his breathing sounds funny -- too shallow and too quick by far, and it dawns on Hopper with a slow dread that curdles in his stomach, that perhaps something is seriously wrong with the teenager in front of him. Steve, for his part, just lays slumped against the wall, head drooping in exhaustion.

“I’m thinking we should probably take you into urgent care.”

Steve sighs in response, which quickly sets him coughing again. El appears in the doorway, hovering uncertainly, wringing her hands in a clear show of anxiety.

“Steve is sick,” she says. Steve glances up at her and gives her a pathetic imitation of a smile. Still, Hopper is oddly touched by Steve’s attempt to make El feel more at ease in spite of his own discomfort.

“M okay,” Steve says, flopping a hand through the air. “It’s not so bad.” El continues to stare at him, clearly unconvinced, and glances at Hopper, eyes wide.

“Hey,” he says, extending a hand. “C’mere.” El steps inside until she’s standing in front of Hopper and next to Steve, eyes wide. Hopper puts his hands on her shoulders and looks her in the eye. *Friends don’t lie.*

“You’re right, Steve is sick,” he says. El swallows thickly and she sniffls just a little. On the floor, Steve tries to drag himself upright, face stricken. “It’s okay, Steve,” Hopper says, holding a hand up. “You just stay where you’re comfortable.” He turns back to El and smiles a little. “He’s sick, but I’m gonna take him to get help. He’ll be alright.”

“Okay,” El says, her voice small. Hopper wraps her up in a hug and presses a kiss to the top of her head.

“You gonna be okay here on your own for a little while?”

“Yes,” she says, nodding against his chest. “Help Steve.”

“Okay,” Hopper says and squats down in front of the teenager in question. “Ready?”

Steve nods and extends a hand, and Hopper levers him easily to his feet. The change in altitude has Steve blanching, but after a few seconds he seems to settle a little and nods to Hopper to keep going. Hopper wraps Steve’s tattered quilt around his shoulders and hands him a bowl to puke into on the drive if he needs to, then helps him out to the truck. El watches from the front door, and waves as Hopper rounds the truck to get in himself.

“I’ll see you soon,” he says before he climbs in. “Promise.”

El smiles and Hopper can see her lips move as she repeats the word to herself.

“Alright kid,” Hopper says as he turns the key. Steve grunts in response, misery written into every line of his body, and Hopper pats his leg. “We’ll get you fixed up. Just hang in there.”

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Here's the last chapter. Hope you enjoy! :)

Going to the emergency room for the second time in three - or four? However the hell many- days is pretty much the worst, but at least it's pretty slow because they let him back just a few minutes after they get there. For a second Steve is worried they're going to tell Hopper not to come with him and then he'll have to get awkward by explaining that, no, he really does want the man who was basically a stranger to him up until a few days ago to stay, but the nurse just raises an eyebrow at the sheriff and he nods and just like that it's fine. Perks of the badge, he guesses.

Hopper sits by him in the little exam room as Steve sits shirtless on a stretcher clutching a basin as a nurse bustles around listening to his chest and starting an IV and all that shit. She unwraps his ribs and inspects the bruising, looks closely at the stitching on his face and makes some notes on her chart.

“Dr. Long will be back in just a few minutes to look you over,” she says, pulling some tubing off the wall and settling it under Steve’s nose. It smells like plastic and he grimaces, but it helps him catch his breath, so he supposes it’s worth it. He’s too tired to say much, but Hopper is the kind of guy who doesn’t need to talk all the time anyway. They sit in silence, Steve dozing on and off and Hopper working on something -- probably a crossword, but Steve can’t see for sure -- until the doctor comes in with the nurse.

He does pretty much the same thing the nurse did, which makes Steve wonder why she did it at all, but after a few minutes he stands up and says a few things to her before turning to Steve.

“Alright Steve, it looks like you’ve got the beginning stages of pneumonia, probably because of the injury to your ribs. Has it been painful to breathe?” Steve nods and glares a little at him, because *obviously*.

“Okay. We’re going to send you to get an x-ray of your chest and we’re going to take some blood to test, but I’m pretty sure that’s what we’re looking at. We’re also giving you some anti-nausea medicine, so hopefully you won’t have to vomit for a while. Once we get those back, we’ll have a better idea of what we’re dealing with, okay? Any questions?”

Steve shakes his head and the doctor turns to Hopper. “Sheriff?”

“Not right now, no.”

“Great. It’s been a slow night, so there shouldn’t be too long of a wait.”

The next little while is a little blurry as the nurse injects stuff into his IV and draws blood. They make Hopper leave for the x-ray so he doesn’t get fried or whatever, and make him stand up and hold his breath (which is really damn hard, thank you very much) to take the pictures. They finally finish and Steve all but collapses back onto the bed, and then Hopper ambles back in.

“How ya doin’?” He asks. Steve shrugs.

“I feel like shit and I don’t wanna be in a hospital,” he says. “You?”

Hopper barks out a short laugh. “You know, just about the same,” he says. “Been a hell of a week. Again.”

Steve huffs out what would normally be a laugh but is now kind of just a breathy chuckle. “You think Hawkins will ever be back to normal?”

Hopper sighs. “I dunno,” he says after a minute. “I sure hope so, though.”

The doctor comes back a few minutes later and says that yes, it is pneumonia and he’s also dehydrated, and that Steve needs to take deeper breaths even though it hurts (which makes Steve want to ask the doctor when he last had broken ribs and how much *he* liked taking deep breaths). They’ve started him on a bag of saline with a course of antibiotics, and after that, he’s free to go home and finish the meds there, provided there’s an adult with him, of course.

“There is,” Hopper says before Steve can open his mouth. “He won’t be by himself.”

Steve looks down and fiddles with the edge of his shirt, feeling himself turn red. He’s not sure if he should smile or cry, torn between embarrassment and gratitude, but settles for somewhere in the middle.

The doctor continues, talking about how the IV will take a while, and Steve suppresses a groan. Another day of school down the tubes and at this rate, he’ll be doing makeup work until the end of the year. Then there’s the whole being in the hospital thing. Maybe he’ll die of boredom and won’t even have to worry about the makeup work.

“Steve? Do you have any questions?”

Steve looks up, surprised that he’s apparently zoned out, and shakes his head. “N-no,” he says. “No.”

The doctor leaves and Steve sighs, letting his head fall back heavily against the pillows. Hopper gives him a sympathetic look.

“I’ll call the school,” Hopper says, rubbing a hand over his face. “But I’m gonna have to go before too long. I really should go to work today.”

“Yeah, no, of course,” Steve says. He squints at the wall, surprised to see it’s already 6:30. “Huh.”

Hopper stands up. “I’m gonna go call your parents, and then we’ll see what happens from there, okay?”

“Yep,” Steve says, laying back again. “Sounds good.”

Hopper is on the phone for a while, and when he comes back, he isn’t alone.

“Mrs. Byers,” Steve says, pushing himself upright.

“Call me Joyce, sweetie,” she says, coming up next to him and immediately feeling his forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Um. Fine,” Steve says slowly, staring up at her in bewilderment. He glances at Hopper, but the older man just looks back at him with a mildly amused expression. “What are you -- I mean, Will--”

Mrs. Byers -- Joyce-- smiles at him. “Will was feeling better and wanted to go to school, and I realized that I’m going to have to let him go back eventually.” Her voice sounds brittle and thin, like it might just shatter if she says too much more. “I could use the company, actually. I don’t work until tonight, and it would be nice to have someone to take my mind off things.”

“Are you -- are you sure?” Steve asks.

“Of course I am,” Joyce says. “I’m just going to grab a cup of coffee real quick. Want something, Hopper?”

“Sure, thanks,” he says. Joyce squeezes Steve’s arm as she leaves.

“What the *hell* ,” Steve hisses, shoving himself upright and wincing.

“She needed something to do, you can’t be alone. Seemed like an obvious choice,” Hopper says. “I’ll swing by to pick you up after I get off work and you can spend the night at my place again.” Steve looks down at his lap, at his stupid casted wrist, and scowls.

“I’m *seventeen* ,” he says, “and I don’t need a damn babysitter.”

“You think that’s what this is?” Hopper says, raising one unamused eyebrow.

“Well isn’t it?”

“Look Harrington, you got hurt helping people I care about. You defended those kids from the demo-whatevers and then your parents couldn’t be bothered to come back early to help you. Like it or not, you’ve become part of this island of misfit toys, and we’re not going to just leave you to wallow alone in that empty house. Got it?”

Steve swallows back a smile. “Got it,” he says.

“And if I hear any bad reports from Joyce, you’re grounded,” Hopper says, straight-faced.

Steve rolls his eyes. “Asshole,” he says.

Hopper chuckles and pats his leg as Joyce comes back in, two styrofoam cups in hand.

“Thanks,” Hopper says, lifting the cup a little. “I’m gonna go ahead and take off.”

“Great. We’ll see you later,” Joyce says, settling into the chair next to Steve.

“See ya,” Steve echoes. “And, uh, thanks. For all of it.”

“No problem,” Hopper says, and then it’s just Steve and Jonathan Byers’ mom. In a tiny, curtained off section of the ER.

“Will sent you these,” Joyce says, handing over a small stack of -- of course-- comic books, as well as a paperback book. Steve picks up the book to reveal a cover with a couple knights facing down a red dragon, with the words “Dungeons & Dragons” in all caps. A small yellow triangle in the corner announces that it’s the basic edition.

“Huh,” Steve says, half bemused and half oddly touched. He ruffles through the pages and is surprised when a piece of paper falls out with his name scrawled across the top and a short message beneath: *Welcome to the party* . He swallows around the lump in his throat.

“You look exhausted, sweetie,” Joyce says, taking the comic books from his lap but leaving the manual or whatever it is. “Why don’t you get some sleep?”

“I don’t want you to get bored,” Steve says.

Joyce rolls her eyes. “This isn’t my first rodeo,” she says. “I brought a book.” She settles into the chair and pulls out a well-worn copy of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* . She waves it a little at Steve as if to prove herself, and opens it to a dog-eared page.

“I, uh,” Steve says, then immediately regrets it. Joyce looks up, eyebrows raised. “I heard what happened. At the school. And I didn’t know B-Bob, but I’m very sorry for your loss,” he says, then looks down, embarrassed.

Joyce is quiet for a second before her hand reaches over and squeezes Steve's. "Thanks," she says. Her voice is thick. "I appreciate that."

Steve closes his eyes and lets out a sigh, suddenly on the verge of just passing out completely.

"Go on and sleep now," Joyce says. "I'll be right here."

So Steve does.

Author's Note:

Thank you to all the reviewers of the King of Hawkins High -- I have been working on this for months, but I swear I haven't forgotten you and I'll respond to you soon!!

As always, I'm more than happy to freak out about these losers on tumblr @elspirito23.